

SEMICONDUCTOR SENSOR WITH PRESSURE DIFFERENCE
ADJUSTING MEANS

5 BACKGROUND OF THE INVENTION

1. Field of the Invention

The present invention relates to a semiconductor sensor, such as an infrared-ray sensor, a gas sensor, an air fuel ratio sensor, a pressure sensor and an acceleration sensor, having a membrane structure.

2. Description of the Related Art

Conventionally, a semiconductor sensor having a so-called membrane structure is frequently used. A membrane (thin film) is formed, by etching, in the center of the undersurface of a wafer and a detecting element is formed on the membrane in order to increase the sensitivity of the sensor. FIG.5A to FIG.5C are illustrations showing a semiconductor sensor having a conventional membrane structure.

As shown in a perspective view in FIG.5A, a semiconductor sensor 10 comprises an insulating material layer 20 and a substrate 30 made of silicon or the like for supporting the insulating material layer 20. As shown in a top view in FIG.5B and in a sectional view along the A-A' line in FIG.5C, the undersurface of the substrate 30 is etched in the center of the sensor to form a thin film part 32 and then a membrane is formed by the thin film part 32 and the insulating material layer 20. After this, a detecting element (not shown) for sensing is formed on the top surface of the membrane so that it has a plurality of layers.

FIG.6A to FIG.6D are each a perspective view, a top view, a side view and a sectional view along the A-A' line, respectively, showing a semiconductor sensor having a conventional membrane structure (membrane) in an assembled state. As shown schematically, the semiconductor sensor 10 is bonded to a mounting surface,

such as a stem 50, with an adhesive 40. A sensor having such a membrane structure has been disclosed in, for example, Patent documents 1 to 3.

[Patent document 1]

5 Japanese Unexamined Patent Publication (Kokai)
No. 7-58134 (paragraphs [0016] to [0020])

[Patent document 2]

Japanese Unexamined Patent Publication (Kokai)
No. 6-129898 (paragraphs [0028] to [0038])

10 [Patent document 3]

Japanese Unexamined Patent Publication (Kokai)
No. 7-120306 (paragraphs [0010] to [0024])

As shown in FIG.6A to FIG.6D, however, if the entire undersurface of the substrate 30 is bonded to the stem 50, a hollow part 34 under the membrane is sealed hermetically and a way of escape of a fluid, such as air, present inside the hollow part 34 is blocked. If the fluid expands or contracts within the hollow part 34 because of the change in temperature, a difference in pressure is produced between the inside and outside of the semiconductor sensor 10, an excessive stress is produced in the membrane, and deformation and distortion of the membrane occur.

In other words, as shown in FIG.7A, when the fluid within the hollow part 34 expands, a gas pressure P_i inside the hollow part 34 becomes higher than a gas (atmospheric) pressure P_o outside the hollow part 34, and the membrane made of the thin film part 32 and the insulating material layer 20 of the substrate 30 is deformed in such a way as to be pushed upward. In contrast to this, as the fluid within the hollow part 34 contracts, the gas pressure P_i inside the hollow part 34 becomes lower than the gas pressure P_o outside the hollow part 34 and the membrane is deformed in such a way as to be pushed downward. If such deformation of the membrane is excessively large, there is a possibility of destruction of the membrane and if deformation of the

membrane at a certain magnitude is repeated, there is a possibility of occurrence of fatigue failure of the membrane.

5 An example of a method for avoiding the above-mentioned problem is such one in which the bonding part of the bottom of the semiconductor sensor 10 to the stem is limited only to a part thereof (for example, refer to Patent document 1), as shown in FIG.8A to FIG.8D and FIG.9A to FIG.9E. FIG.8A to FIG.8D show how only opposite
10 sides of the bottom of the semiconductor sensor 10 are bonded to the stem with adhesives 40a and 40b. FIG.8A to FIG.8D are each a perspective view, a top view, a side view in the X direction and a sectional view along the line A-A', respectively. FIG.9A to FIG.9E show how only
15 four corners of the bottom of the semiconductor sensor 10 are bonded thereto with the adhesives 40a, 40b, 40c and 40d. FIG.9A to FIG.9E are each a perspective view, a top view, a side view in the X direction, a sectional view along the line A-A' and a sectional view along the line
20 B-B', respectively.

By limiting the bonding part only to a part of the bottom as described above, the hollow part 34 under the membrane and the outside of the semiconductor sensor 10 are communicated with each other through the gaps at
25 the parts not bonded, as shown in FIG.8C and FIG.8D and in FIG.9D and FIG.9E and, therefore, a difference in gas pressure between the inside and the outside of the semiconductor sensor 10 can be eliminated.

However, the use of this method causes a
30 problem: it becomes difficult to control the quantity of adhesive 40 to be applied when the semiconductor sensor 10 is mounted on the stem 50 and the mounting process becomes complicated. In other words, if the quantity of adhesive 40 to be applied is too small, the bonding
35 strength is reduced and if, in contrast to this, the quantity is too large, the adhesive invades even unwanted parts and the hollow part 34 is sealed because the entire

circumference of the bottom of the substrate 30 is bonded with the invaded adhesive. Therefore, it is necessary to precisely control the quantity of adhesive to be applied.

Another example method is such one as used in
5 an infrared-ray sensor disclosed in Patent documents 2 and 3, in which the semiconductor sensor 10 is formed as a package and the internal space of the package and the hollow part 34 are put under a vacuum or in a pressure reduced state. FIG.10 shows a conventional packaged
10 infrared-ray sensor.

As shown in FIG.10, the infrared-ray sensor 10 has an infrared-ray detecting part 80 formed on a membrane made of a thin film part 32 and an insulating material layer 20. The bottom of a substrate 30 is bonded
15 to a stem 50 with adhesive 40 and a cap 70 having a window part provided with a filter 72 is fixed on the step 50 in a close contact (seal welded) state and thus the infrared-ray sensor 10 is formed as a package. Then, the inside of the cap 70 and the space within a hollow
20 part 34 are put under a vacuum or in a pressure reduced state. By putting the hollow part of a semiconductor sensor 10 and the internal space of the cap 70 excluding the hollow part under a vacuum or in a pressure reduced state, as described above, the change in the difference
25 in gas pressure between the inside and the outside of the semiconductor sensor 10 due to the change in gas temperature within the hollow part 34 can be eliminated or considerably reduced.

However, this method requires that packaging
30 (forming as a package) be carried out in a hermetically sealed container equipped with an evacuation system which has a vacuum means and an exhaust means and, therefore, the process for assembling a sensor becomes complicated and the cost is raised.

35 SUMMARY OF THE INVENTION

The above-mentioned circumstances being taken into consideration, the object of the present invention is to

provide a semiconductor sensor having a membrane structure, capable of preventing the destruction of a membrane, caused by the expansion and/or contraction of a fluid within a hollow part formed under the membrane, while the sensor is in use.

In order to attain the above-mentioned object, a semiconductor sensor according to the present invention comprises a pressure difference adjusting means, for eliminating the difference in fluid pressure between an inside and an outside of a hollow part formed under an membrane structure while the sensor is in use, on a substrate on which the membrane structure is formed. By comprising the pressure difference adjusting means, it is possible to eliminate the difference in fluid pressure between the inside and the outside of the hollow part caused by the change in fluid temperature and to prevent the destruction of the membrane due to the deformation of the membrane caused by the difference in pressure.

The pressure difference adjusting means can be realized by at least one relief hole, provided in the membrane and for the expansion or contraction of a fluid within the hollow part. Through this relief hole, the internal space and the external space of the hollow part are communicated with each other and, therefore, even if the entire circumference of the substrate bottom is bonded to the stem or the like, the difference in pressure between the inside and the outside of the hollow part is eliminated and, as a result, an excessive stress is not produced on the membrane and the distortion of the membrane is not caused to occur. Moreover, due to this, the need of the complicated control of the quantity of adhesive to be applied, as shown in Patent document 1, can be obviated and the mounting process can be prevented from becoming complicated.

Moreover, as there is no need to put the internal space of a package for housing the semiconductor sensor under a vacuum or in a pressure reduced state, the

complicated process for assembling a sensor shown in Patent documents 2 and 3 can be eliminated.

5 The present invention may be more fully understood from the description of the preferred embodiments of the invention set forth below, together with the accompanying drawings.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

In the drawings:

10 FIG.1A is a perspective view of a semiconductor sensor (No.1) according to an embodiment of the present invention.

FIG.1B is a top view of the semiconductor sensor (No.1).

15 FIG.1C is a sectional view along the A-A' line in FIG.1A.

FIG.2A is a perspective view of a semiconductor sensor (No.2) according to an embodiment of the present invention.

20 FIG.2B is a top view of the semiconductor sensor (No.2).

FIG.2C is a sectional view along the A-A' line in FIG.2A.

25 FIG.3A is a diagram showing one step of a process flow of a method for manufacturing a semiconductor sensor according to an embodiment of the present invention.

FIG.3B is a diagram showing another step of a process flow of the method for manufacturing a semiconductor sensor according to an embodiment of the present invention.

30 FIG.3C is a diagram showing another step of a process flow of the method for manufacturing a semiconductor sensor according to an embodiment of the present invention.

35 FIG.3D is a diagram showing another step of a process flow of the method for manufacturing a semiconductor sensor according to an embodiment of the present invention.

FIG.3E is a diagram showing another step of a process flow of the method for manufacturing a semiconductor sensor according to an embodiment of the present invention.

5 FIG.3F is a diagram showing another step of a process flow of the method for manufacturing a semiconductor sensor according to an embodiment of the present invention.

10 FIG.4 is a flow chart of a method for manufacturing a semiconductor sensor according to an embodiment of the present invention.

FIG.5A is a perspective view of a conventional semiconductor sensor (No.1).

15 FIG.5B is a top view of the conventional semiconductor sensor (No.1).

FIG.5C is a sectional view along the A-A' line in FIG.5A.

FIG.6A is a perspective view of the semiconductor sensor (No.1) in FIG.5 in a state of being assembled.

20 FIG.6B is a top view of the semiconductor sensor (No.1).

FIG.6C is a side view of the semiconductor sensor (No.1).

25 FIG.6D is a sectional view along the A-A' line in FIG.6A.

FIG.7A is an illustration for explaining the deformation of a membrane caused by the expansion of a fluid within a hollow part under the membrane in the conventional semiconductor sensor.

30 FIG.7B is an illustration for explaining the deformation of a membrane caused by the contraction of a fluid within a hollow part under the membrane in the conventional semiconductor sensor.

35 FIG.8A is a perspective view of a conventional semiconductor sensor (No.2).

FIG.8B is a top view of the conventional semiconductor sensor (No.2).

FIG.8C is a side view of the conventional semiconductor sensor (No.2).

FIG.8D is a sectional view along the A-A' line in FIG.8A.

5 FIG.9A is a perspective view of a conventional semiconductor sensor (No.3).

FIG.9B is a top view of the conventional semiconductor sensor (No.3).

10 FIG.9C is a side view of the conventional semiconductor sensor (No.3).

FIG.9D is a sectional view along the A-A' line in FIG.9A.

FIG.9E is a sectional view along the B-B' line in FIG.9A

15 FIG.10 is a diagram of the conventional semiconductor (No.3) showing a general construction thereof.

DESCRIPTION OF THE PREFERRED EMBODIMENTS

20 Embodiments of the semiconductor sensor of the present invention are explained below with reference to the accompanying drawings.

FIG.1A to FIG.1C are each a perspective view, a top view and a sectional view along the line A-A' of a semiconductor sensor according to an embodiment of the present invention, respectively. The semiconductor sensor 25 10 comprises the insulating material layer 20 of a silicon oxide film, a silicon nitride film, etc., and the substrate 30 made of silicon or the like for supporting the insulating material layer 20, and is mounted on a stem 50 by bonding with an adhesive 40. The substrate 30 30 is provided with a thin film part 32 formed by etching the undersurface in the center of the sensor and a membrane is formed by the thin film part 32 and the insulating material layer 20, as shown in the top view of FIG.1B and the sectional view of FIG.1C. On the top 35 surface of the membrane, a detecting element (not shown) for sensing is formed in a stack.

As shown schematically, the semiconductor sensor 10 is provided with relief holes 22a to 22d for the expansion or contraction of a fluid within a hollow part, which penetrate through the thin film part 32 and the insulating material layer 20 in the vicinity of four corners of the membrane and, thereby, the hollow part 34 of the semiconductor sensor 10 and the outside (circumstance) of the semiconductor sensor 10 are communicated with each other.

The relief holes 22a to 22d serve as a pressure difference adjusting means for eliminating the difference in fluid pressure between the inside and the outside of the hollow part 34 while the sensor is in use and, therefore, even if the entire undersurface of the substrate 30 is bonded to the stem 50 as shown schematically, ways of escape are ensured for the fluid present within the hollow part 34 and the difference in gas pressure between the inside and the outside of the semiconductor sensor 10 can be eliminated. Due to this, it is possible to prevent the membrane from being deformed even if the fluid within the hollow part 34 expands or contracts because of a change in fluid temperature.

The relief holes 22a to 22d are not necessarily provided at the four corners of the membrane, as shown in FIG.1A to FIG.1C, but at least one relief hole may be provided in the membrane. FIG.2A to FIG.2C are each a perspective view, a top view and a sectional view along the A-A' line, of a semiconductor sensor provided with one relief hole 22 at the center of the membrane, instead of the four relief holes 22a to 22d in FIG.1A to FIG.1C.

The process for providing the relief holes 22 and 22a to 22d for the expansion or contraction of a fluid within the hollow part in the semiconductor sensor 10 is explained below with reference to FIG.3A to FIG.3F and FIG.4. FIG.3A to FIG.3F are diagrams showing the process flow chart of a method for manufacturing a semiconductor

sensor according to the embodiment of the present invention and FIG.4 is a flow chart of the method for manufacturing a semiconductor sensor according to the embodiment of the present invention.

5 FIG.3A shows the silicon substrate 30 before the membrane and the relief holes 22 are formed. On the silicon substrate 30, a silicon nitride film and a silicon oxide film forming the insulating material film 20 are formed as a membrane by the CVD (chemical vapor
10 deposition) method or the like (shown in S101 and FIG.3B). Next, a detecting element layer 82 in accordance with an object to be detected by each kind of sensors and an insulating layer 24, such as an intermediate
15 insulating layer and a protective insulating layer, are formed as membranes by the CVD method or the like and are stacked after pattern formation by a photo lithograph method or the like (shown in S103 and FIG.3C).

 Then, an etching mask 61 such as a silicon nitride film is formed as a membrane on the bottom of the
20 substrate 30, the thin film part 32 of the substrate is formed by wet etching, and thus the membrane is formed (shown in S105 and FIG.3D). After this, openings 26 are provided in the positions, in which the relief holes 22 for the expansion or contraction of a fluid within the
25 hollow part are provided, by dry-etching the insulating material film 20 and the insulating layer 24 made of an intermediate insulating layer and a protective insulating layer by using the RIE (reactive ion etching) method or the like (shown in S107 and FIG.3E). Finally, dry etching
30 of the thin film part 32 of the silicon substrate is carried out by using the insulating material film 20 made of a silicon oxide film and a silicon nitride film and the insulating layer as a mask and, thus, the relief
35 holes 22 for the expansion or contraction of a fluid within the hollow part 34 are provided (shown in S109 and FIG.3F).

 In the manner described above, it is possible to

provide the relief holes 22 for the expansion or contraction of a fluid within the hollow part in the semiconductor sensor 10.

5 While the invention has been described by reference to specific embodiments chosen for the purposes of illustration, it should be apparent that numerous modifications could be made thereto, by those skilled in the art, without departing from the basic concept and scope of the invention.